

Measuring God

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[0 : 0 0] Tonight we are going to turn to four or five different sections of scripture, but we can perhaps focus our attention first of all on the passage that's identified up there, Jeremiah 31, 35 to 37. And I'll explain in due course as to why we're looking at these verses and some of the others which we have read. Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, the Lord of hosts is his name. If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever. Thus says the Lord, if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord.

As you can see on the bulletin, our title tonight is measuring God. Now as most of you will probably know before I became a minister, I used to be an engineer. And one of the things that I love to do is measure stuff. I think ever since I was a child, I loved to know how heavy things were, how tall they were, how old they were, how valuable they were, how powerful they were. And I'm still the same. I love to measure things. I love to know the quantities and powers that lie behind things. A couple of weeks ago, we were at the Royal Highland Show, which was full of awesome tractors. Now one of the tractors we saw in real life was this, which is possibly the coolest thing I've ever set eyes upon in my life. And if you don't agree with me, Derek was talking about repentance in the morning so you can think that through. This tractor, 692 horsepower, 12.9 litre engine, if you know anything about engines, that is enormous. Most of your cars will be something pathetic like 1.6 hybrid or something hideous like that. 28 tonnes, absolutely awesome.

I love measuring things. I love knowing how big, powerful, heavy and strong things are. Because if you want to learn about something, you have to measure it, don't you? Particularly if you're in engineering or construction or anything like that. Measurement is important.

And it's especially important if you're going to rely on that thing. So imagine somebody had just released a new type of plane and you were on the very first flight and you were sitting next to the designer of that plane and you were chatting about how the whole thing was constructed just before you were going to take off on this maiden flight.

And you were sitting there and you said to the chap beside you, how do you measure the correct length of wingspan? If he replied to you and said, I'll have to guess, then I think you'd be feeling very uncomfortable. Measuring is really important. You can learn a huge amount about something by measurement. So tonight our question is, can you measure God? Is that even possible? Can you discover God's limits? Can we identify the boundaries in which God exists? Can we quantify His power? If that tractor is 692 horsepower, what's God's power?

[3 : 56] What's His knowledge? Can we measure His strength? Now that might seem like a silly question in some ways. Surely it's impossible to measure God. But yet at the same time, if we are to have knowledge about God, surely we have to be able to measure Him somehow. And we're kind of faced with a dilemma. Measuring God seems impossible because God is infinite. By definition, that's immeasurable. But at the very same time, measuring God seems to be essential because we need some kind of measure if we're going to know anything about Him.

And because of that, whether we realize it or not, we very often measure God, or perhaps to put it in different words, we often place God within measured limits that we can understand.

That's been true right through the history of humanity. Back in the Old Testament, one of the most common ways to do that, one of the most common ways to measure and understand God was in terms of territory. So the religious mindset of the ancient Near East was very much linked to geographical location. So a certain God was associated with a particular area. A great example of that is in 1 Kings chapter 20. The Syrian king, Ben Haddad, had come to launch an offensive against Israel. He came with a vast army expecting to win, but they engaged in battle and they were defeated. And in the aftermath, the king, Ben Haddad's advisors, came to him and they said this, their gods are gods of the hills. So they were stronger than we, but let us fight against them in the plain and surely we will be stronger than they. And do this, remove the kings, each from his post and put commanders in their places and master an army like the army that you've lost, horse for horse and chariot for chariot, then we will fight against them in the plain and surely we will be stronger than they. And he listened to their voice and did so. There's this really strong link between territory and the extent of God's power. You can read the rest of 1 Kings 20 when you get home to find out what happened next. But this pattern of associating God with a territory has been repeated throughout history. It's not so much been with geographical territories, but in other ways. So sometimes God is measured as far as the limits of the territory of history. So people will think even today, well, a religious mindset is something that belongs to the era of days gone by. It's not for now. Sometimes God is just limited to the territory of morality. So faith has just about been a good person.

The measure of moral living is as big as God gets. Sometimes God is measured by the territory of our minds. So the idea that God must fit into the limits of our understanding. That's the mindset that has kind of rejected the biblical doctrines that we struggle to get our heads around. Things like the Trinity and the incarnation, people have pushed them away because they think, well, God, we can only measure as far as our minds go, and that's the limits in which he must operate. Sometimes God is measured by the limits of what we'd call a kind of spiritual territory. So God is kind of this sort of being, sort of reality, sort of something. But it's out there, and it's detached from physical life that's in front of us. In all these ways, whether people realize it or not, they're measuring God.

So God's relevance is measured up to a certain point in the past. His authority is measured as far as just being a good person. His nature is measured as far as our minds can go, but no further. His existence is measured as far as some kind of mystical spiritual realm.

[7 : 58] People do it all the time, and maybe we do it as well. We think that we can measure God, and as a result, we confine him to these territories. Things like time or morality or rational thinking or spiritual mysticism. And we think that if we can keep God in these boxes measured out carefully, then we can get a workable knowledge of God. But the truth is, all of that is a wrong approach to measuring God, because it puts us above God. It's like looking down on him and saying, God should fit into that measured off boundary, which I've created in my mind. It's creating our categories and forcing him into it. It's basically based on the presupposition that whatever God is, we need to be able to have a handle on it.

But we must never forget that true knowledge of God will not fill your mind. True knowledge of God will blow your mind. But we're still left with a question, can we measure God?

And if we can't measure God, how are we going to learn about God? Is there a territory that we can use to measure God? And after everything I've just said, you're probably sitting there thinking, well, no, there isn't. You can't measure God according to the hills, and you can't measure Him just according to rational thinking. Surely there's no territory that we can measure God. Is that true? Well, is there a territory that we can use to measure God? The Bible's answer is yes. There is one territory that we can use as a tool to measure God. Do you know what that tool is? It's the universe. The universe is a tool that we can use to measure God. Now, I just want to mention two important points right at the beginning.

I want us to note that we're not saying that the universe is God. That's pantheism, the idea that everything around us is divine. That's not what we're saying. That's just another example of limiting God to our own boundaries. We're not saying that God is the universe.

Not are we saying that the universe is as big as God. When the Bible uses the universe as a tool for measuring God, it does so by analogy, not by equivalence. So we're not saying that the universe is God. We're not saying that the universe is as big as God.

[10 : 55] We are saying is that the universe is a tool that we can use to help us get some sort of information in terms of measuring God. I want us to look at five passages tonight. We've actually looked at all of these passages already tonight. We've either sung them or read them.

Each of these passages uses the universe as a tool to try and measure an aspect of God's nature and character. We'll just go through them one by one briefly. First of all, our call to worship tonight. My thoughts are not your thoughts. Neither are your ways, my ways declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. Here in Isaiah 55, we have a contrast between earth and heaven. You'll remember that the Old Testament word for heaven can mean the sky. It can mean the universe and it can mean the heavenly realm where God dwells. Here, the emphasis is primarily on the sky because verse 10 talks about rain, but we're being pointed towards just the vast expanse that an Old Testament man or woman would see when they stood outside and looked up. From their perspective, the difference between earth and the heavens above is huge. It's just way up there. There's a vast difference in height, and that vast difference is an analogy for the difference between the way we think and the way God thinks, between the way we are inclined to go and the way God is inclined to go. Often, we can think that God is just really quite like us, but just a little bit higher. He's kind of like a super person. The truth is God is way higher than we are, way higher. When it says God's ways are higher than our ways, it's using the universe as the tool to tell you how big that difference is. God operates at a level that is just altogether higher than us. That explains why we should not be remotely concerned if there are some theological truths that we cannot completely grasp. Often, people are really worried when they can't fully understand something about God. Really, we should be far more worried if we had a God that we can completely get our heads around. A God that a human mind can fully explain is always going to be a man-made God. Second passage, we sang in

Psalms 147. He determines the number of the stars he gives to all of them their names, great is their Lord and abundant in power, his understanding is beyond measure. This Psalm explicitly uses the universe as a measuring tool for God. It's talking about God's power.

How powerful is God? How great is his understanding? Well, if you can count all the stars, then that will give you some idea. Now, for the Old Testament mind, way back in the days when the Psalms were being written, that was an immeasurable quantity. Today, we actually have a little bit more of a grasp. But the scientific facts of today only make the analogy even more amazing. I googled how many stars are there in the universe. Please allow for the fact that this might not be a definitive total, but this is what Google said. There are about 10 billion galaxies in the observable universe. The number of stars in a galaxy varies, but assuming an average of 100 billion stars per galaxy, that means there are about, I'm not even going to start trying to say that, a billion trillion stars in the observable universe.

God has a name for every one of them. So if you want to measure God's power and understanding, you need a measuring tape that has the name of a billion trillion stars written on it.

[15 : 20] One passage speaks about God's strength. It's what we read from Isaiah 40. Behold, the Lord comes with might, his arm rules for him. Behold, his reward is with him, and is recompensed before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms.

He'll carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span? Enclose the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance.

Who has measured the spirit of the Lord or what man shows him counsel? Whom did he consult and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice and taught him knowledge and showed him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket and are accounted as the dust on the scales. Behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. First 10 speaks about God's might. So this passage is measuring how strong God is, and the focus primarily is on the imagery of the palm of God's hand. So I want you just to look at your own hand and imagine that there's a wee pool of water in it. Often if you try to pick up water, you only end up with a tiny little pool in your palm before most of it dribbles away and you just end up with a wee bit left. So we can only hold a bit of tablespoon of water in our hands. Now I want you to imagine that your hand was so big that the Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean and all the seas of the world were contained in that tiny pool. That's a measure of how big and strong God is. The vast imagery continues in verse 15, to God all the nations of the world are like a drop in a bucket, or like the leftover dust on a set of scales. Those are who bake if you put flour on a scale and then put it into your bowl. There's always this kind of tiny little bit of flour just left on the scale, just leftovers. These things are a picture of the nations of the world to God. The dust and the drop in a bucket are like the nations. That of course is why idolatry is so utterly ridiculous. Verse 18 says, to whom will you liken God? To what likeness can you compare him? The idea that the God who holds the ocean in his hand and to whom the nations are like dust, the idea that you can make a statue of him is just crazy. That's why the Second Commandment prohibits worshiping God through images. The point being emphasized is that God's strength is immense and only the universe itself comes close to measuring that. Do you not know, do you not hear, has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to dwell in. The entire universe is just like a curtain to God. If you close the curtains tonight when you go to bed, that's what the universe is to God.

Most passage speaks about God's presence. We sang it in Psalm 139. Where shall I go from your presence, spirit, or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you're there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell on the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me. The imagery here is remarkable. The Psalm speaks about space travel. It speaks about ascending up into the heavens, into the universe.

It speaks about underground probing, going down to the grave. That's what that word Sheol refers to. It was the grave, the place of the dead, which in the Old Testament mind was down. Heaven was up, grave was down. He speaks of ocean exploration, flying across to the uttermost parts of the sea. If you could reach the limits of all of these things, will you get beyond God? And the answer is no. God's presence is inescapable, and the universe is the measure of that. Can a human get out of the universe? No. Can we get beyond God's presence? No. And then lastly, we come back to the passage we read from Jeremiah 31, which speaks about God's commitment. Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar. The Lord of hosts is his name. If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me. Thus says the Lord, if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of

[20 : 40] Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord. Now, this is a famous passage. It's speaking about God's covenant relationship with his people, and in particular, it's speaking about God's commitment to the new covenant, to the ultimate fulfillment of all his promises. And verses 36 and 37 are simply saying that if time stops and if the universe can be measured, then God's commitment will fail. And of course, the whole point of that poetic language is to say that that is never going to happen. And the principle behind all of these passages is that if you want to measure God, the best tool available to humanity for doing that is the universe itself. But while that gives us something to look at, while it gives us a tangible point of measurement and comparison, yet at the same time, we all know that the universe is immeasurable to us. That's why it's such a good tool for measuring God.

It's tangible, but immeasurable. It gives us a reference point for the immensity of God, but at the same time, the fullness of that is too much for us to take in. And of course, it all makes sense. The whole reason the universe is so big is because the heavens declare the glory of God. Sometimes when we see the vastness of the universe and the tininess of earth, it can shake our faith because we think, can God be real in all of that? But the truth is, of course, God is real in all of that. If God is God, if God is infinite, then He needs a massive universe if it's going to declare His glory. It's a great reminder that the theology of the Bible is mind-blowing. But in all of that, you might be thinking, Thomas, what on earth has any of this got to do with me? And in many ways, measuring the vastness of God can hit us with a sense of total insignificance. And if we're talking about the universe as a measuring tape, if you measure yourself against the universe, then it makes you look like absolutely nothing. And in many ways, one of the great tragedies of Godless science today is that the immensity of what we discover leaves us feeling more and more worthless and insignificant. You think this universe is huge, a hundred billion trillion stars, I can't even begin to get my head around that. I feel so tiny and so insignificant in comparison to that. And maybe you feel the same, maybe you feel lost and worthless in this massive universe. Well, if you feel like that, there's something amazing that I want you to see in these five passages that we read. Because if we go back to them, we'll see that they've got something else in common. Yes, on the one hand, they all use the universe as a measuring tape for God. But they all do something as well. They make a direct connection between the infinite magnitude of God and his astonishing commitment and care towards you. Look at these passages again. If we just go a couple of verses behind what we just read in Jeremiah, it says, this is the covenant I'll make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord,

I'll put my law within them, I'll write it on their hearts, I will be their God, they shall be my people, no longer shall each one reach his neighbor and each his brother say, know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sins no more. And then he goes on to talk about the order of the day, the light, the moon, and the stars. Psalm 139, if I ascend to heaven, you're there, if I make my bed and she'll you're there, if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me.

Psalm 40, speaking about God's might and strength, the one who has the oceans in his hand like a pool of water, the nations like the dust of the scales, it says he will tend his flock like a shepherd, he'll gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young. Psalm 147, numbering the stars says that he heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. And then Isaiah 55, the whole reason that God's, that we've been told that God's thoughts and ways are higher than our ways is because he's telling us to return to the Lord, that he might have compassion on us to our God, but he will abundantly pardon. The great truth that's been said before us is not simply the mind-blowing immeasurability of God, the great truth been said before us is that the immeasurable strength of God means that he can hold you and never let you go. The limitless power and understanding of God means that he can bind up your wounds and heal you. The inescapable presence of God means that he'll always be with you and he will never leave you. The vastly superior thoughts and ways of God means that he can forgive you and pour his compassion upon you. The eternal commitment of God means that you can know him forever, that you are his and he is yours. And the reality of all that is brought together in the second passage that we read from Colossians chapter one. It speaks about how all the fullness of God is found in Jesus Christ. All that vastness that we've measured is seen in Jesus. He's the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things and in him all things hold together.

He's the head of the body, the church, he's the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent, for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross and you who were once alienated and hostile in mind doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in the body of his flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. All that vastness and greatness of God is revealed in Jesus and in him the immeasurable greatness of God's power, his strength, his understanding, his presence, his commitment is all being channeled towards God's great goal, which is to save you and to have you with him. And Jesus Christ, the one through whom the whole universe was created, the one in whom the whole universe is being held together, he came to die for you so that that can happen. That means that the hand that can hold the oceans and the nations and the universe, that hand was nailed to a cross so that you could be saved. And this is why measuring God is so important because the more you can use the universe to measure God, the more you will discover how loved you are. And that's where we see that theology will not just blow your mind, theology will warm your heart. And I really hope you can see that. The Christian Gospel presents you with a God whose love and commitment to you is so great that the only tool that can come close to measuring it is the universe. And God grant that every one of us would respond to that by worshiping him, trusting him and following him. Amen. God our Father, we bow before you as the immeasurable God, but we also run into your arms as the one who loves us so much. And we thank you so much for all that your word is teaching. And we marvel at the size of the universe, not because the universe is great, but because it just shows us how amazing you are. Amen.